

## **COVID-19, lockdown experiences and the role of social workers in cushioning the effect in Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

COVID-19 is a novel virus with a devastating impact on the economy of nations. The virus has claimed so many lives worldwide and also in Nigeria. The study was designed to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on Nigerians, their lockdown experiences, vices that prevailed during the period, and the role social workers can play in the fight against COVID-19. The study adopted a phenomenological research design. The instrument for data collection was an in-depth interview guide and 15 respondents constituted the sample size. The result of the study shows that COVID-19 had a catastrophic impact on the Nigerian economy and individual wellbeing. The COVID-19 lockdown preventive measures and palliatives were ill-managed and poorly organized, leading to many economic hardships on the populace. Youths engaged in unlawful acts and vices during the lockdown. The efforts of social workers in the fight against COVID-19 were greatly limited by a lack of recognition and professionalization. This affected their capacity to function optimally. The study, therefore, recommends a speedy professionalization of social work in Nigeria given its importance to the wellbeing of the citizenry.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, lockdown, experiences, palliatives, Nigeria

### **Introduction**

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a novel coronavirus. A significant number of persons infected with the COVID-19 virus will go through mild to moderate respiratory illness and recover without requiring special treatment. However, older people and those with underlying medical problems like diabetes, cancer, chronic respiratory disease, and cardiovascular disease are more likely to develop serious illness (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). This category of coronavirus is very new and had not been experienced around the globe prior to November 2019. Currently, COVID-19 has no cure, though a lot of research by health scientists are being conducted around the globe to develop a vaccine. COVID-19 originated in Wuhan China and spread around the world (Shereen, Khan, Kazmi, Bashir & Siddique, 2020). COVID-19 is spread from human to human through human droplets. Common symptoms of COVID-19 include shortness of breath, cough, and fever, while less common symptoms include repeated shaking with chills, sore throat, headache, muscle aches and pains, and loss of taste and smell, while severe

symptoms include: persistent pain or pressure in the chest, trouble breathing, and loss of speech or movement (Jewell, 2020). Symptomatic as well as asymptomatic carriers can spread the virus. In order to avoid infection and further spread of Covid-19, the following hygiene practices and preventive measures were encouraged: constant washing of hand with soap on running water, frequent use of hand sanitizer, avoiding touching of eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands, avoiding close contact, covering mouth and nose with cloth face cover when around others, cleaning and disinfecting frequently touched surfaces daily, and sneezing inside elbow (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020).

COVID-19 pandemic has caused problems around the globe with infections and deaths raising daily (Worldometer, 2020). Africa is not left out of the increase in infections and deaths (Rahman and Shaban, 2020). On the part of Nigeria, the Nigeria Center for Disease Control [NCDC] (2020a) reports rising infections and deaths. Nigeria received the news of the index case of COVID-19 with dread and fright partly because the virus is novel and nothing that the world has seen before and also given the impact the virus has had on European nations with all their sophisticated health care system. The index case of COVID-19 in Nigeria was confirmed on the 27<sup>th</sup> of February 2020. The case was an Italian national who works in Nigeria and returned from Milan, Italy to Lagos, Nigeria on the 25<sup>th</sup> of February, 2020 (NCDC, 2020b). Immediately after the index case was discovered, the Nigerian government put in place a lot of measures to stem the spread. One of the major measures was the lockdown of three states namely Ogun State, Lagos State, and Abuja the federal capital territory. State governments followed suit and initiated lockdown of their states.

However, these lockdowns of states created other problems such as scarcity of food and the proliferation of social vices. Many people were lockdown at home without benefitting from government palliatives and this led to a lot of deprivation and social vices. Social workers are among major front-line workers in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic around the globe. According to the International Federation of Social Worker [IFSW] (2020), social workers are expected to perform the following key functions during the period of COVID-19 pandemic: ensure that the most vulnerable are included in planning and response; organize communities to ensure that essentials such as food and clean water are available; advocate within social services and in policy environments that services adapt, remain open and pro-active in supporting communities and vulnerable populations, and facilitate physical distancing and social solidarity. Finally, social workers are also expected to advocate for the advancement and strengthening of health and social services as an essential protection against the virus, inequality, and the consequent social and economic challenges.

This study therefore is formulated to investigate vices and anomalies that characterized the Nigerian coronavirus pandemic and lockdown experiences. A lot of scholars have theorized on the impact COVID-19 on Nigerian, but none has brought empirical evidence to bear (Ebenso and Otu, 2020; Jacob, Abigeal and Lydia, 2020; Iwuoha and Aniche, 2020; Ozili, 2020). This study is designed to void that gap. This study will employ empirical evidence to tell stories of COVID-19 experiences in Nigeria and investigate the role Nigerian social workers have played to cushion the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic within the country.

## Methodology

The study adopted a phenomenological research design that focuses on the commonality of a lived experience within a particular group (Creswell, 2013). This enabled the researcher to get a deep understanding and clear descriptions of the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Nigerian context. This study was conducted in Nsukka, Enugu state. The study utilized a qualitative approach, using an in-depth interview guide [IDI] as the instrument for data collection. Fifteen respondents between the ages of 18 years and above constituted the sample size. The participants were selected purposively based on willingness to share any special experience during the lockdown period and availability. Special care was taken to ensure the observance of social distancing, hence some of the interview sessions took place via the mobile phone, while a two-meter gap was observed for the interviews done face to face. Informed consent was obtained from the respondents before the commencement of the interviews. Data collected were transcribed, read, and reread. Phrases and themes were subsequently grouped to form clusters of meaning. These meanings were then used to support the research argument.

## Findings

### *Belief in the existence of COVID-19 in Nigeria*

Some of the respondents had wrong assumptions about the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. Some of the wrong assumptions include that COVID-19 does not exist; that COVID-19 does not affect the black man, COVID-19 was caused by the 5G network, as well as that COVID-19 cannot survive in Africa because of the scourging sun. According to one of the respondents:

For many people, this coronavirus is a scam to them, I was in a place yesterday and one man was saying that there is no coronavirus, that the government is using this as an avenue to siphon public fund for private use. A man told me that he will not use gloves or face mask because coronavirus does not exist. What baffled me is that this man is a learned man and not an illiterate, so I am even confused myself if this thing is really true because I have not seen anyone that I know that it killed (**Female civil servant**).

In supporting the assertion above, another respondent said:

Coronavirus is a biological weapon developed by China to subdue other nations so as to assert economic dominance. I do not think the virus will affect the black man. Also, one pastor told us that it is the 5G mobile network was the cause of the virus. Also, I believe that the intensity of the sun can kill it especially as there is no one I personally know who has been killed by Coro (**Male local petroleum dealer**).

### *Assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Nigerians*

Various efforts were made by the government to stem the spread of COVID-19. One such effort was lockdown. However, the assessment of the lockdown measure by respondents who were interviewed shows that it was not effective. People were as a matter of fact lockdown inside their homes without food or water. This created more problems. In-depth interviews with respondents showed that many Nigerians suffered economic hardships because of the COVID-19 lockdown. The economy was shutdown

including businesses and this made it difficult for many families and individuals to cope. The following illustrative quote portrayed the magnitude of the problem:

Coronavirus has killed Nigeria. Everything is shutdown. Civil servants are crying, business people are crying. The poor masses are crying, there is no food. The stay at home policy has limited me and most Nigerian from going out to make money. There is inflation and the cost of goods is very high. There is a scarcity of goods and people are using that opportunity to inflate the price of goods. The market is shutdown. People are afraid and in panic (**A male provision store seller**).

According to another respondent:

The COVID-19 lockdown was not effective because the basic needs of the poor masses were not met. There was no government palliative, even the money that was donated by philanthropists did not get to the people at the grass-root. In the more advanced countries like the USA, UK, the citizens were provided with food daily and 1,200 dollars was paid to residents to take care of their needs but here in Nigeria, nobody took care of anybody's needs. People suffered so much during this lockdown (**Male bartender**).

Some of the respondents noted that many prominent Nigerians who depended on medical treatment abroad for survival. These categories of persons died during the pandemic because they could not travel abroad for medical treatment. One respondent puts it this way:

There was a lot of deaths from other illnesses; one of the richest men in my town died, he normally receives treatment in Germany but because of the lockdown he was not able to travel. I have heard of two other cases also, even one senator from here died because he could not go to India for his regular treatment because of the lockdown. He had a heart problem (**Female hairdresser**).

#### *Social vices and COVID-19 lockdown*

The vices and mishaps include crimes of all kinds such as stealing, robbery, and burglary. Below is a quote from a respondent:

The record of deaths in Nigeria was high due to the COVID-19 lockdown. A lot of people suffered lack and this led to stealing and armed robbery. An example is a lecturer in Plateau state, he was robbed and killed. One of the killers was caught and he confessed that he and his friends had no money for food as a result of the lockdown and that was why they robbed the lecturer and shot him in the process (**Male commercial bus driver**).

Many of the respondents noted that issues of rape and domestic violence were recurrent discussions on TV, radio, and social media during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in Nigeria. According to one of the respondents, "people with abusive tendencies were locked down together with innocent ones during this COVID-19 pandemic and that resulted in incidences of rape, domestic violence and partner abuse, in particular. Infact men were just beating their wives" (**Female civil servant**). Some of the respondents also revealed that there was a lot of police brutality during the lockdown in Nigeria as

the police were forcing people to stay at home with a brutal force which sometimes led to death. According to one respondent

This lockdown was just a big business opportunity for police people, Road Safety even Civil Defence. They were just collecting bribe from people in order for them to go from one place to the other. There were so many videos of police flogging pregnant women, shooting young boys, and so on. Infact the police made the effect of the lockdown worse (**Male Trader**)

#### *Distribution of palliatives by the government*

Many of the respondents noted that many well-meaning Nigerians and international organisations donated close to 100 billion Naira for the government to help them fight the pandemic and also used to buy palliatives for the masses. However, according to them, the government palliatives did not trickle down to the poor masses but was rather a make-belief displayed on the television. One of the respondents has this to say:

We did not see any government palliative. We saw a display of palliatives on the television but nothing actually got to the poor masses. Things like hand sanitizers, food materials were donated by private individuals to the government but we did not get these relief materials. They hoarded them for their families and friends only (**Female petty trader**).

Many of the respondents believe that the funds and palliatives that were meant for the public were diverted for private use. Another participant reflected thus:

As a result of bribery and corruption, government palliatives did not get down to the poor masses. Greed could not allow people at the top to share with the less privileged. People don't have the fear of God anymore. If there was fear of God among our politicians, the government palliatives could have gotten to the poor masses. Ethnicity, tribalism, and nepotism were also a barrier to the government palliatives. The tribe with political power kept the government palliative to themselves. As a result of this, the government lockdown and palliative were not successful (**Male storekeeper**).

#### *The role of social work and COVID-19 pandemic response*

We interviewed some social workers also to find out what roles they have been playing since the pandemic. Some of them reported that Nigerian social workers have significant roles to play in the fight against Covid-19. These roles include public enlightenment on preventive measures, community education, community mapping for the most vulnerable during the pandemic, and help in the distribution of palliatives to the most vulnerable people. Two of the respondents who were medical social workers reported that they personally educated patients on preventive measures. However, all of them noted that lack of recognition and institutionalization of the profession undermined the efforts of the Nigerian social workers. One of them stated:

We the medical social workers are involved as coronavirus frontline workers. We engage in contact tracing of those who are infected with the virus. We give community education and sensitize the community members on how to prevent coronavirus infection as contained in WHO and CDC safety guide and manage the fear that is associated with the virus (**Female medical social worker**).

One of the social workers noted that lack of involvement of social workers in the distribution of palliative was one of the main reasons why the palliatives did not get to the real people. According to her:

Social workers are supposed to handle government palliatives to the public but the process is being politicized, the politicians are handling the palliatives by themselves. This is why the palliatives did not get to the poor masses. If social workers have handled the distribution of palliative, it would have gotten to the poor masses because they are in a better position to do that (**Female medical social worker**).

The social workers interviewed also discussed some of the challenges and barriers they encounter in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. An illustrative quote by one of them is shown below:

In our society, the profession is not well recognized, a lot of people who are not trained social workers are recruited to do the work of social workers that is why there are lapses because the properly trained social workers are not handling things. The professionalization of social work in Nigeria is still not done and that constitutes a big challenge to social work practice in Nigeria (**Male social worker**).

## **Discussion**

One of the major findings of this study was that Nigerian social workers played a marginal role in the management and fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the minor roles were in the area of public enlightenment and community education on COVID-19 preventive measures, helping in the distribution of relief materials from non-governmental agencies. This finding is in line with studies from China and other countries of the global North on the special role social workers have played amidst this pandemic (Cui, 2020; Walter-McCabe, 2020). These significant contributions of social workers were in line with the stipulated key functions of social workers in the fight against COVID-19 as stipulated by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2020). However, the significant contributions of social workers were not without challenges. Scholars like Ogbonna, (2018) and Okoye (2013) have stressed a lack of professional recognition as the major challenge facing social workers in the country.

The COVID-19 pandemic adversely affected the economy of Nigeria as a nation and that of individual citizens in particular. Studies by Nevin (2020) and Ozili (2020) demonstrated the catastrophic impact of COVID-19 on the Socio-economic wellbeing of Nigerians. Furthermore, the Nigerian COVID-19 lockdown was suboptimal and grossly ineffective. This was generally because people were shutdown at homes without their basic necessities supplied. As a result of this precarious situation, people took to crimes and various vices in order to survive. Also, it was reported that monies donated by well-meaning Nigerians and international organizations as palliatives to help cushion the effect of the lockdown did not trickle down to the poor masses. This was because of corruption in the form of embezzlement and misappropriation. Orjimo (2020) in his assessment of lockdown in Nigeria also captured the gross ineffectiveness of the Nigerian COVID-19 lockdown, which was a result of lack of government

support to the citizens who are observing sit down at home with the absence of basic necessities.

### Conclusion

Nigeria, just like the United States of America and any other COVID-19 worst-hit European country has had its fair share of the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. What is different for Nigeria is that its preventive mechanism like lockdown as well as the palliatives was ineffective, poorly managed, resulting in so many vices such as rape, domestic violence, stealing, robbery, police brutality, and so on. The study recommends that concerted effort must be made to root out corruption in Nigeria which jeopardized government palliative initiatives. Also, welfare and insurance schemes should be strengthened to be proactive in meeting the needs of citizens in times of crisis. The health care system which is currently ill-equipped and underprepared to tackle the surge of a pandemic should be funded adequately and well equipped. Nigerian government should give the social work profession its place at the center of welfare provision and administration in Nigeria. Most importantly, the professionalization of the social work profession, given its strides in other European countries is strongly recommended.

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